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SIPDIS

DEPT FOR EUR/CARC AND DRL; PLEASE PASS TO USAID

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TAGS: PGOV PREL PHUM KDEM EAID AJ

SUBJECT: PRESIDENTIAL CHIEF OF STAFF STILL STEWING OVER
HUMAN RIGHTS CRITICISM

REF: BAKU 358

Classified By: Ambassador Anne E. Derse per 1.4 (b,d).

¶1. (C) Summary: Presidential Chief of Staff Ramiz Mehdiyev used a May 27 meeting with visiting NDI Regional Director Laura Jewett and the Ambassador to lay out in stark terms the Azerbaijani Government's continuing anger over recent public statements by U.S. officials that were critical of Azerbaijan's human rights record. Mehdiyev underscored that the U.S. statements were not reflective of the strategic partnership between the U.S. and Azerbaijan and were particularly "insulting" given recent, undemocratic events in Georgia and Armenia. He urged U.S. officials to share any concerns in direct, private conversations with President Aliyev. Mehdiyev continued to question NDI's neutrality but agreed that his staff should meet regularly with NDI to address any programming concerns. He pointedly did not address NDI's concerns about the deregistration of the Election Monitoring Center, stating only that international and domestic partisan observers would be invited for the October presidential election. End summary.

¶2. (SBU) The Ambassador accompanied National Democratic Institute (NDI) Regional Director Laura Jewett on her May 27 introductory call on Presidential Chief of Staff Ramiz Mehdiyev, to underscore USG support for NDI's programming in Azerbaijan. Mehdiyev was accompanied by a phalanx of aides: International Relations Advisor Novruz Mammadov, Legal Advisor Shahin Aliyev Law Enforcement Advisor Fuad Alasgarov, and Policy Analysis Advisor Elnur Aslanov. Jewett was accompanied by NDI Acting Country Director Ian Woodward; the Ambassador was accompanied by Pol/Econ Chief (notetaker).

¶3. (SBU) Jewett provided an overview of NDI programs in Azerbaijan, emphasizing that NDI supports democratic institutions and procedures, not particular political agendas or figures. NDI strives to be open, transparent and responsible and to respect the sovereignty of the host government. Jewett highlighted election monitoring as an important signal of a government's commitment to free and fair elections and noted that NDI was concerned by the court verdict that deregistered and closed the Election Monitoring Center (EMC).

NDI'S ALLEGED "PARTISAN" ACTIVITIES

¶4. (C) Mehdiyev said that the GOAJ would continue to cooperate with NDI but was "puzzled" by one issue: does NDI seek to work with the government or its opponents? "Our experience indicates that NDI prefers to run activities separately with our political opponents, where opposition topics directed against the government are discussed,"

Mehdiyev alleged. "If NDI truly wants to strengthen democratic institutions, it should work with the government. Separate meetings with our opponents are not acceptable for us."

¶5. (C) Jewett reassured Mehdiyev that NDI has no political preferences and works with both the ruling and opposition parties. Although NDI currently did not have many activities planned with the government, it was happy to entertain suggestions. Mehdiyev welcomed the offer, but insisted that if NDI is working with political parties, it is doing inherently political work. Jewett responded that NDI is a political party institute and seeks to strengthen democratic institutions and political pluralism in Azerbaijan by sharing party experiences from throughout the world. Mehdiyev agreed that regular meetings with NDI would be helpful and named Presidential Political Advisor Ali Hasanov as the appropriate interlocutor.

WE'LL LET YOU KNOW IF WE NEED ASSISTANCE

¶6. (C) Mehdiyev said that Azerbaijan is a "true supporter of democratic elections" in comparison with its neighbors. Cataloging the violence and democratic abuses that surrounded recent elections in Georgia and Armenia, Mehdiyev complained that the international community had nevertheless judged these elections free and fair. In light of the problems surrounding Armenia's presidential election, Mehdiyev said the Azerbaijani Government was "worried and surprised" by Secretary Rice's statement that Azerbaijan's democratic record lagged behind Armenia. Mehdiyev affirmed the Azerbaijani Government's commitment to free and fair

elections and said that "if we need assistance, we will apply to NDI, IRI and the U.S. Embassy." (Comment: Mehdiyev laid down this tough line regarding U.S. election assistance in early April, following the U.S. "no" vote on Azerbaijan's UNGA resolution, reftel.) He added that the Government would welcome observers from international organizations and that candidates could deploy their own domestic observers. He pointedly did not address the status of EMC.

"INSULTING" U.S. STATEMENTS

¶7. (C) Mehdiyev complained that recent statements by Secretary Rice and President Bush criticizing Azerbaijan's human rights record "insulted" the Azerbaijani people and did not reflect the "strategic partnership" between the U.S. and Azerbaijan. "Friends are not advised to speak this way about their own friends. As a friend of the U.S., Azerbaijan expects U.S. leaders to give an appropriate assessment of Azerbaijan." He continued that the statements were "not in line with our expectations. We are offended and these feelings are still in our hearts." Mehdiyev also accused the U.S. Peace Corps of violating its ban on political activities, as evidenced by a meeting in Washington in which the Peace Corps' Azerbaijan Country Director asked Secretary Rice what the U.S. could do to hasten democratic reform in Azerbaijan.

THE AMBASSADOR PUSHES BACK

¶8. (C) The Ambassador responded that Azerbaijan is a strong friend and partner of the U.S. The U.S. firmly supports and truly shares Azerbaijan's goal of maintaining its independence and sovereignty, as this goal is in our interest as well. She pointed to President Aliyev's joint press conference with President Bush in April 2006, in which Aliyev affirmed Azerbaijan's gratitude for U.S. democracy and governance assistance, and pledged his commitment to engage with the U.S. on political reform, as an important pillar of our relationship. Continued disagreement over Azerbaijan's democratic progress suggests that this is an area where we must redouble our efforts and find constructive ways to move forward. The upcoming visit of DRL A/S Kramer will be an

important opportunity to intensify our ongoing dialogue on democracy and human rights.

¶9. (C) The Ambassador underscored that the U.S. urges all of its partners to respect the highest standards of democracy and human rights. The U.S. has publicly and privately expressed concerns over events in all three Caucasus countries; the U.S. would not be honest if it said all problems in Azerbaijan, particularly with respect to the media, were resolved. She noted that U.S. assistance is designed to support Azerbaijan's own goals of promoting democratic reform and respect for human rights, and that the U.S. and all of its assistance partners are committed to working transparently. The Ambassador added that Mehdiyev's comments regarding the Peace Corps do not reflect reality. The Peace Corps is a completely apolitical organization.

TALK TO PRESIDENT ALIYEV

¶10. (C) Mehdiyev responded that the strategic partnership between Azerbaijan and the U.S. is "unshakable and unchangeable" but given pre-election tensions in Azerbaijan, "politicians should watch their statements." Recent messages by U.S. leaders were "accepted in a very negative way," due largely to the negative comparison to Armenia, "the aggressor who occupies our land." The United States' "double standard" toward election-related violence in Armenia is of great concern for Azerbaijan. "Friends shoul think about the consequences of their statements," Mehdiyev underscored. "U.S. officials should not repeat these events in the future; if they have concerns, they should discuss them directly with President Aliyev."

COMMENT

¶11. (C) Mehdiyev used this meeting with NDI to deliver a strong and very direct message to the U.S. Government. The Azerbaijani Government is still clearly angry about recent U.S. public comments critical of Azerbaijan's human rights record. President Aliyev also reiterated the GOAJ's anger and request for clarification in a May 30 meeting with EUR

DAS Merkel, septel. We believe that continued, high-level engagement will be needed to help repair relations and ensure that vital democracy and governance assistance can continue.
DERSE